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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S MARCH 29 MEETINGS WITH MASHADANI, ATTIIYA AND RIKABI

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: The Ambassador met separately on March 29 with Sheikh Khalid Al-Attiya, Deputy Speaker of the Council of Representatives (CoR); Mahmoud Mashadani, Speaker of the CoR, and Sadiq Rikabi, political advisor to Prime Minister Maliki. The Ambassador stressed that failure in Basrah was not an option, that the conflict is not between political parties but between the government and extremist/criminal elements, and that a JAM victory in these circumstances would be dangerous for all Iraqis. He emphasized that it is imperative to rally support behind Prime Minister Maliki and the ISF. All three Iraqis agreed with that assessment and shared their own assessments of the situation, including their analyses of Iran's involvement. Sheikh Khalid noted that the CoR would take up a resolution on March 30 to express support for the PM and the ISF. End summary.

Sheikh Khalid

¶2. (S) The Ambassador met 3/29 with Deputy Speaker Khalid Al-Attiya at the CoR. Turning immediately to the current crisis, Attiya said the sentiment among the various political blocs was that they needed to unite in support of the GOI. He noted that even Tawafiq was saying "good things" (although he later described a Tawafiq statement on the crisis as "very weak . . . (it has) neither taste nor color") and the Kurdish Alliance was being cooperative. Attiya said that Maliki's Shia supporters and the Kurds were working on a draft CoR resolution supportive of the GOI's efforts to impose law and order. He said there was also some talk of asking the CoR's Human Rights Committee to mount a fact-finding mission.

¶3. (S) Sheikh Khalid said he and Speaker Mahmoud Mashadani had met earlier in the day with prominent Sadrists MPs, who were still seeking to engineer a no-confidence vote. The Sadrists continued to insist that Maliki leave Basrah immediately. Sheikh Khalid told them their demands were unacceptable, and if met would damage the prestige of the Iraqi state. The Deputy Speaker assessed that the Sadrists' tone had changed slightly from the day before, most likely because they were beginning to feel pressure from Iraq's other political parties which were lining up behind the Prime Minister. The one exception, he added, is the Fadhilah Party, which he described as "worse than the Sadrists, more corrupt, and even more responsible for the situation in Basrah." He noted that Fadhilah has totally aligned itself with the Sadrists against the GOI and Maliki.

¶4. (S) Sheikh Khalid and the Ambassador agreed that it was imperative that the GOI must make it clear to the Sadrists and the broader public that this is not a clash between political parties, but rather a struggle between the Government of Iraq and extremists/criminals. Sheikh Khalid said he had stressed to the Sadrists that the operations in Basrah were not targeted at the Sadrists Trend per se. The problem, he said, is that the Sadrists are still stung by the

events in Karbala last autumn that led to the initial JAM ceasefire. Consequently, they were determined to resist the ISF operation in Basrah even before they fully understood its intent. Sheikh Khalid said the basic problem is that all Sadists, extremists and moderates alike, believe the Sadr Trend should not surrender its weapons.

¶5. (S) As for the Marja'iya's position, Sheikh Khalid said he had spoken with Grand Ayatollah Sistani's son on Thursday, March 27, and on the basis of their conversation he was confident that the leading clerics were supportive of the integrity of the state and in favor of imposing law and order on the criminal gangs in Basrah. However, Al-Attiya said that he detected a regrettable note of caution from the Marja'iya -- they wanted the GOI to impose order, but wished to avoid taking a clear position and thereby becoming a party to the conflict. Sheikh Khalid disparaged an anti-government fatwa issued by Fadil al-Maliki, who he dismissed as "a devious man who is rejected by the Hawza and not recognized as a religious scholar."

Mahmoud Mashadani

¶6. (S) In a meeting immediately afterwards with COR Speaker Mahmoud Mashadani, Mashadani told the Ambassador that he had been surprised not to have been informed in advance of the PM's plans for the Basrah operation, although he conceded that now is not the time for criticism. (However, he later voiced amazement at Maliki's decision to roll the dice by going to Basrah personally. "Why didn't he send the Minister of Defense, or the Minister of the Interior? That way, if the operation worked he could claim credit, and if it failed he'd have someone to blame," said Mashadani.) Mashadani

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noted that it was difficult for the ISF to control the militias, whose members are "very zealous." He claimed that Muqtada al-Sadr (MAS) had communicated via intermediaries that he is "embarrassed" by the current fighting but that he needs an initiative from the GOI that he can support before ordering his forces off the streets. Mashadani mused that a deal might be possible if the GOI pledged not to pursue or arrest those militia members who return to their homes. He declared that in any event, it was his duty as Speaker of the CoR to help contain the militias. "The state must be strong. If we respond to their demands now, it will look like we caved in to their pressure. Then Mosul will try the same thing," predicted the Speaker. The ideal solution, continued Mashadani, would be for MAS to pull his mainstream JAM forces off the street, leaving the Special Groups behind to be defeated by the ISF.

¶7. (S) Mashadani agreed that the Sadr effort to topple Maliki was "foolish," although he cautioned that even some in Maliki's UIA bloc were not being as supportive as they could. "There are hidden agendas here," said Mashadani, alluding to Iran and its historic ties to ISCI. Mashadani also predicted that if the fighting continued for more than a week, Basrah would become like Anbar. "And it took us four years to fix Anbar," he warned, later adding, "The sooner the GOI resolves this, the better."

¶8. (S) Continuing his analysis of the crisis, Mashadani reviewed plans to send a parliamentary delegation to Najaf to broker a resolution to the conflict. Mashadani was skeptical of the plan, which he did not expect to produce results. "The real Sadrists decision makers are not in Najaf," he said, adding that even if a deal were near, the Sadrists would likely change their position at the last moment in order to prolong the conflict. As for the other parties backing the proposed parliamentary mission, Mashadani skewered Ahmed Chalabi as "looking for his lost glory" by siding with the Sadrists, who did not respect him. In contrast, he said former-PM Ibrahim Jafari was more realistic and was taking a nationalist (i.e., anti-Iranian) position.

¶ 9. (S) Mashadani said that the Arab League Summit ought to produce a statement of support for Maliki's position. "The Iranians need to know (from the Arab neighbors) that there is a redline here, and that if they cross it they will face consequences," said the Speaker. Nonetheless, Mashadani was not optimistic that the Iranians would move quickly to calm the situation.

Sadiq Rikabi

¶ 10. (S) Rikabi expressed appreciation for the President's and the Ambassador's support of PM Maliki, adding that "the battle for Basrah is a battle for the fate of Iraq." For the GOI to be defeated would mean handing one third or one half of Iraq into the hands of "killers and those behind them (i.e., Iran)." Rikabi asked for further U.S. support, whether in the form of air support or in terms of political cover for the Prime Minister. The Ambassador reassured Rikabi of the USG's full support for Maliki, and outlined some ideas for helping the PM to resolve the crisis in a manner that would put the train back on the right track. Rikabi pointed out that one of the challenges in trying to negotiate with the Sadrist is that it's not clear who in the Sadr universe has any real decision-making authority.

Understanding Iran's Game

¶ 11. (S) Pointing out that Iran's support of the JAM Special Groups in this conflict could well rebound against Iran's long-term interest in a stable Iraq, the Ambassador probed for analyses of Iran's behavior. Sheikh Khalid noted that ISCI and Da'wa had sent a joint delegation (comprised of MPs Hadi al-Ameri and Ali al-Adeeb) to Tehran to deliver a strong message that Iran must stop its interference. Sheikh Khalid assessed that Muqtada al-Sadr is a "disturbed person" who at times acts as a tool for the Iranians and at other times asserts his independence; the Sadr Trend itself is evolving along the lines of Hizballah. Iran's goal, said Al-Attiya, is to make Iraq like Lebanon -- an outcome that he vowed Iraq's Shi'a community would never accept. Mashadani suggested that Iran was intervening to prevent Iraq from concluding a long-term strategic partnership with the U.S., and that even ISCI was upset by Iran's position, which was harming the interests of Iraq's Shia community. Sadiq Rikabi later picked up on this point, saying the Iranians are generally misperceived as playing a sectarian game when in fact they are acting solely on the basis of Iranian national interests. "The Iranians don't care about the Shia, which is why they allied themselves with Armenia against Azerbaijan,

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even though Armenia is Christian and Azerbaijan has a large Shi'a community," said Rikabi. In addition, Rikabi said that Iran was seeking to sow chaos in Iraq in order to gain control of the south, and possibly to provide Tehran leverage with which to negotiate a deal with the U.S.

Failure is Not an Option

¶ 12. (S) With all three interlocutors, the Ambassador stressed that winning this battle is imperative for the success of the Iraqi state. This is a crisis for Iraq, not for Maliki. Consequently, now is the time for Iraqis to close ranks behind the Prime Minister. The U.S. and the Coalition would do their part by providing all reasonable support to the PM and the ISF. The key would be to identify a political solution that would allow PM Maliki to reassert the sovereignty of the Iraqi state, even though a military solution is not at hand. He noted that he had shared some creative ideas along these lines (including the possibility of a jobs-creation program at the Basrah port to reward those who turned in their weapons and pledged loyalty to the GOI)

with CoR member Sami al-Askari, who was en route to Basrah to pitch them to the Prime Minister. Al-Attiya noted that it was hard for PM Maliki to retreat without achieving something.

¶13. (S) Sheikh Khalid said now that the ISF have joined battle in Basrah, failure would be disastrous for Iraq. "If the Sadr Trend succeeds, it will continue along this same path. The other political blocs, including the Kurds and Tawafuq, realize they will all be in danger if that happens," said the Deputy CoR Speaker. Rikabi had the most difficulty assimilating the Ambassador's message, and seemed to hold out hope that with more time and additional close air support from MND-SE, the ISF might be able to pull out a military victory in Basrah.

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